

# *The New* REPUBLIC

Published on *The New Republic* (<http://www.tnr.com>)

---

## Taking Care of Family Business

Jonathan Cohn March 21, 2010 | 5:42 pm



When Democrat Bart Stupak announced he'd be supporting health care reform, thanks to an agreement on abortion rights, a reporter asked Stupak if he'd consulted with fellow Michigander, John Dingell. "Yes," Stupak smirked, "Mr. Dingell had a piece of me last week." He went on to explain that the two had been in close contact. "I kept him apprised of what I was doing," Stupak said, "and he kept me apprised of the need to move forward."

Stupak may simply have been paying homage to Dingell, who has been something of a mentor over his career. But the recognition of Dingell is entirely appropriate. As I've said before, health care reform is the family business for Dingell. During the 1940s, his father, John Dingell Sr., co-sponsored the first serious proposal for universal health care.

Today, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi made a point of using the gavel that Dingell had used when he called the House into session in 1965, in order to pass Medicare.

Earlier this week, I spoke with Dingell at his office. The prospect of health care reform passing seemed increasingly likely, but many liberals remained skeptical. I asked Dingell what he'd say to those lawmakers. Here's what he told me:

I'm going to point out to them that, if we don't do somethig about health care, this is going to destory the country.

And I'm going to point out to them that I was for single-payer long before anybody else in these parts were.

My Dad started it. And when he started it, it was a matter of humanitarian concern. It's still a matter of humanitarian concern. ... The country is going to go broke. Families are going broke.

I worked long and hard for this. I found that, only about every 20 years does the opportunity for this kind of legislation come to be. And I don't think we can afford to wait 20 years for the next time that this comes around, because of the human suffering, the incredible economic costs, and the competitive and other difficulties the country confronts because of this.

I also asked him what he'd say to his friends in the Blue Dog coalition, many of whom remained convinced the bill didn't do enough to control costs:

If we don't do something, the costs are going to be much, much worse. Very soon. We could have gotten control of these things by taking the Nixon plan in the early 70s. ... If we'd taken what Clinton wanted to do, we'd have held costs down ...

There are 430 people in this place and every one of them can think of ways the bill can be improved--and every one of them can think of things that they are dissatisfied with in the bill. But the legislative process is not about getting exactly what you want. It's about getting the best thing you can to resolve great public questions.

You have no choice. You have to go forward on this.

---